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Correspondence

HISTORY AS AN ART

(A note on *Le Crime de Sylvestre Bonnard*)

Editor MODERN LANGUAGE JOURNAL:

Readers of Anatole France will remember a discussion between Sylvestre Bonnard and Gélis in regard to the claims of history as a science. The old academician is endeavoring to inspire his impetuous pupil with respect for the generation of scholars who, he says, made of history a science governed by rigid laws. Gélis replies that history is not and cannot be a science but an art in which the imagination alone brings success; the *rigid laws* are in reality only the taste or the caprice of the artist who chooses his *facts* and his *authorities* for sentimental reasons. "Dans tous les arts l'artiste ne peint que son âme." Here surely is impressionism of which Anatole France is one of the prophets. Let us note in passing that here Gélis is on the side of impressionism while Sylvestre is the dogmatist. Then there comes a sudden change of rôles as the discussion turns on the novels of Walter Scott, which Sylvestre defends against the iconoclastic Gélis. "Tout le passé vit dans ses admirables romans; c'est de l'histoire, c'est de l'épopée! —C'est de la friperie," replies Gélis. How does it happen that the champion of history as a science upholds Walter Scott and even identifies history and épopée? And Gélis, to be logical, should accept Sir Walter as the prince of historians, as one who realized just what history is and worked accordingly. But youth is never logical and Gélis was a lover of paradox; it is Sylvestre's attitude which needs a gloss.

The explanation of the anomaly has not, as far as I am aware, been sought by commentators. I should like to propose one which is not, I think, devoid of interest. In *La Vie Littéraire* there is constant repetition of such ideas as these: "On ne sort jamais de soi-même . . . La critique est, comme la philosophie et l'histoire, une espèce de roman à l'usage des esprits avisés et curieux, et tout roman, à le bien prendre, est une autobiographie." Such judgments offer reasons for identifying the writer, at least to some extent, with the characters he has added to fiction. Sylvestre Bonnard is universally accepted as one of the spokesmen of his protean creator. In the discussion of history he appears for an instant in the opposition and his mantle falls on Gélis. The author seems suddenly to realize that he and Sylvestre are not of the same generation. A moment later, in speaking of Scott,

Sylvestre again becomes the mouthpiece of Anatole France. After all, both are true to their own time on this point. Balzac, it will be remembered, was a great admirer of Scott, and Zola, who hails Balzac as the father of realistic fiction, was scandalized by such a vagary. Anatole France does not share Zola's opinion, but there can be little doubt that Scott was losing his prestige in the third quarter of the last century in France.

In the second volume of *La Vie Littéraire* there is some fun at the expense of a philosopher who had launched an attack on the pretensions of history to scientific exactitude. The philosopher would reduce history to a simple compilation of statistics. In reviewing the work Anatole France comes upon some of his own ideas and promptly claims his property, "Je les avais jetées (ces raisons) légèrement et par badinage il y a dix ans, dans un petit livre intitulé le *Crime de Sylvestre Bonnard*. Je n'y tenais point. Mais maintenant que je vois qu'elles valent quelque chose, je m'empresse de les reprendre." And he quotes a page of the remarks of Gélis: "Qu'est-ce que l'histoire? etc." The nonchalant tone, *je n'y tenais point*, must not of course be taken seriously, for the ideas expressed by Gélis are at the very core of the doctrine of universal relativity so dear to the author. That he, like Gélis, believes history at its best an imaginative art, and like Sylvestre, would recognize Scott as one of its masters, is clear from the conclusion of the essay. "Je sais aussi bien que vous que l'histoire est fausse et que tous les historiens, depuis Hérodote jusqu'à Michelet, sont des conteurs de fables. Mais cela ne me fâche pas. Je veux bien qu'un Hérodote me trompe avec goût; je me laisserai éblouir par le sombre éclat de la pensée aristocratique d'un Tacite; je referai avec délices les rêves de ce grand aveugle qui vit Harold et Frédégonde. Je regretterais même que l'histoire fût plus exacte. Je dirais volontiers avec Voltaire: 'Réduisez-la à la vérité, vous la perdez, c'est Alcine dépouillé de ses prestiges.' . . . L'histoire narrative . . . est encore, avec la poésie, la plus fidèle image que l'homme ait tracée de lui-même.

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THE MEXICAN-AMERICAN SCHOLARSHIP FOUNDATION

Managing Editor, THE MODERN LANGUAGE JOURNAL:

At the Trade Congress called by the American Chamber of Commerce in Mexico City on February 19, 1919, a resolution was offered by Mr. Will A. Peairs of Des Moines, Iowa, calling for the naming of a committee to investigate the practicability of interchange of students between the United States and Mexico. The proposition was made for four distinct reasons: 1st, The very